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He turned and watched as Gary wriggled back and forth, his unintelligible garble obviously part of the dream that Lucky had witnessed him struggle through countless nights. Unexpectedly, controlled by the terror, Gary sat straight up.

“*Noooo!*” Gary howled with his arms outstretched in front of him, his hands balled into fists.

Lucky remained motionless; gradually closing his eyes so that when Gary looked at him he appeared to be sleeping. Gary rubbed his head. Panting like a dog that had dashed across a field, his heart pounded in his chest. He stood up and walked to where the fire had fizzled to embers. After a momentary gaze at the flickering remains he turned and trudged toward the river.

As Gary’s footsteps got quieter and he moved out of distance the hush was again broken, this time with a lot less of a scare to it.

“Gettin’ to be near every night,” Tim whispered, never opening his eyes and somehow aware that Lucky was awake.

“I hear ya. There’s got to be something we can do for him?”

“He needs to check himself into the VA and sit down with a shrink. If he doesn’t, he ain’t ever gonna get that stuff off his chest.”

“You know he’s not going to do that” Lucky deduced.

“No more than you’re going to go under the knife for that heart condition of

yours” Tim said nonchalantly, not concerned that he may have pissed Lucky off.

“I said I’m going to do something about it” Lucky finally replied.

“Uh huh” Tim said before rolling over and trying to go back to sleep.

Lucky had a sudden uneasiness creep over him like a chill. For the first time in his life he considered never seeing Reagan before he died. He assumed that the only reason he was still alive was because a greater power afforded him the prospect of making amends. He also owed Marlana an apology. Even if it could never erase all of the damage he caused, it would be one that was wholehearted.

An hour slipped by and Gary had not returned as he typically had done all of the previous times when he would have his nightmare. Lucky, being unable to find any peace, scrambled out of his sleeping bag and hiked down the hill, hoping Gary was okay. When he got to the bank of the river he saw Gary perched on a rock about fifty feet away, mumbling to himself. He knew to approach slowly, not wanting to startle him. When he got within fifteen feet he stopped and stood quietly, trying to figure out what to say.

“What’s up Lucky?” Gary asked calmly, never turning to look back at him.

“Just checking on ya, that’s all.”

“I’m good.”

“Mind if I sit down?” Lucky asked, looking for a place to sit.

“It’s a free country.”

Lucky leaned against a fallen tree and looked out at the water as the moon danced over the ripples.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Got a ton of crap on my mind,” Gary said, looking over his shoulder at Lucky for

a split second before turning back and staring off into the darkness.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Nope.”

“Ain’t gonna get no better if you keep pressure cooking it down inside.”

“You think it’s gonna get better by whining to you about it?”

“It might” Lucky suggested.

An awkward minute passed, Gary was motionless as he contemplated uttering a word of his anguish as Lucky felt cornered by his own persistence.

“They all died, man. Every last one of those guys died” Gary sobbed boisterously.

It stunned Lucky. He didn’t expect a response, no less one that was jam-packed with emotion.

“So, how’d it happen?” he asked, trying to coax Gary to continue.

“We were riding down the same damned road we went down every damned day. Clarke, Montenegro, Bannerman and me, the four of us, we were on our regular route, you know?”

“Okay?”

Garza’s body raised and then slumped as he sighed heavily, his voice crackling with pain.

“Bam! Just like that we’re popped up in the air, sand and dust everywhere. And the blood, I’ll never forget the damned blood. It splashed around like someone popped the cork on a big ass bottle of champagne” Garza gestured his hands as he relived the event.

“IED?” Lucky assumed.

“Roger that, had to be an enormous IED too. The whole damned vehicle was chucked three meters straight up into the air. Hell, probably more. And it all happened so fast; we didn’t react because it was done in a blink of an eye. When we crashed back down it was like we bounced up, and then slammed down again. Next thing ya know we’re taking incoming small arms fire like a hornets nest, freakin’ bullets pelting into the metal and windows, just all over the place” Garza’s hands grew intense, punching out to the left and right.

“They must’ve ambushed you.”

“Roger that, so anyway, I look up,” Garza continued, “Clarke was driving. His legs were spurting blood onto the windshield like a fountain. With each attempt to lean forward to get to him I had to duck bullets and flying glass. I yelled for Bannerman to help him because he was riding shotgun. His head was up against the door, and he wasn’t moving at all. I didn’t know if he was knocked out, or what.”

“And Montenegro, he was in the back with you?” Lucky asked.

“Poor freakin’ Monty, damn man, that guy lifted his right leg, I was sittin’ right there next to him and his boot stayed on the floor. He started to freak out, we both were freakin’ out. Nothing but blood, flesh and two bones poked up out of his boot.”

“Damn man, you guys weren’t alone out there, were ya?” Lucky asked.

“No, we were an escort, but hell, between the blast and every one of them bastards laying down fire, no one could move. I tried to open the door, don’t ask me why because it wasn’t bound to be pretty out in the open, but it was jammed shut anyway. The door looked like twisted metal. All I could do was pull the CAT off Monty’s rig and try and get it on him. Bannerman wasn’t comin’ round and Clarke, I never saw anything like

what he was doing.”

“Sounds like a bad scene, but hey, if it bothers you, you ain’t gotta say no more”

Lucky said, listening to the torment in Garza’s tone.

“I don’t know if you ever saw a guy get hit like this before, Lucky, but Clarke, well, I don’t even know how to explain it.”

Lucky looked over at Garza, and then down at the ground, “yeah, saw some of that happen, you never get adapted to it. Hell, I still haven’t sorted it out yet” he admitted.

“Yeah, it’s exactly like that for me too, Lucky. And Clarke, oh my God freakin’ Clarke, the stuff he was doing was just insane, bro. He was sitting there pulling parts of his legs off the freakin’ dash, the steering wheel, even the damn ceiling and he’s trying to put them back in place. Bro, he was calm as could be, didn’t say a word, just grabbing chunks of himself and trying to fit ‘em like a puzzle.”

Garza was clutching air with his hands as he simulated Clarke’s efforts, grasping imaginary body pieces and putting them on his legs like his haunting dream reminded him.

“I’m sorry dude, I really wish you would’ve said something. It’s eating you up keeping all of that inside.”

Garza turned on the rock to face Lucky.

“That’s not the worst of it” Garza said softly.

Lucky looked directly back at him, even in the darkness they could see each other’s eyes.

“Yeah, you said they all died,” Lucky offered.

“The worst of it is, all that goin’ down, my three buddies all blowed up, I have

pieces of them all on me, I mean, I literally taste their blood, and all I got is this little shaving nick on my cheek and this one across my bottom lip” Garza said, pointing to his scarred skin.

“Fourteen stitches and a Purple Heart later and there I am laying in my rack. Hell, I don’t even need a night in the hospital. And the worst of it is,” Garza slouched down.

“Yeah man, what’s the worst of it? Let it out bro.”

Garza’s eyes filled with tears, his bottom lip trembled and he said, “I lived.”

“No way, you can’t blame yourself for your buddies!” Lucky shouted at him.

“Why can’t I?” Garza hysterically screamed back.

“Did you know that the IED was there? Did you know what was going to happen?” Lucky argued.

“*NO!* But living isn’t any easier knowing what happened to them.”

Lucky had difficulty finding something to counter that statement.

“But you’ve got to have family, parents, a wife, kids, someone?”

“Really? Yeah, oh, okay. I’ve got a couple aunts, uncles, cousins, who knows where they are. When I was first deployed my Dad got into a car accident on the interstate not far from home. He never lived to see the paramedics arrive.”

Lucky was losing ground.

“How about mom?” he asked.

“Yeah, how about her? Heart attack came just a few days after we got jammed up. She’s always had a bad heart, heart problems all her life, ya know? Diabetes, high cholesterol, all the things she was meaning to take care of but never got around to. It was tearing her apart from the inside. When I finally got my head out of my butt, boohooing

about my bro's, that gets dumped on me. Everyone that ever mattered to me was gone just like that," Garza said as he snapped his fingers.

"A good looking guy like you... there's no lady out there?" Lucky said.

"Nope" Garza's head drooped even lower as he examined the ground. "I came home and I guess Amy got tired of waiting, split out with another dude. Tore me up bad, in some ways worse than it all. Still does, because even at this very moment I'm totally in love with her" Garza trembled.

"That's a lot of bad stuff, no wonder you can't sleep."

"That, and every time I try to catch some shuteye she's always right there waiting for me in my dreams, the hurt comes back and stays with me when I wake up?"

"Who's that?" Lucky said.

"Amy. She's in everything I do, in every dream I have that isn't about that day my guys died. She won't go away because I won't, I mean I guess I can't just let her go" Garza sniffed using the sleeve of his shirt to wipe at the tip of his nose.

Lucky couldn't imagine what Garza was feeling deep inside, but the story he just told left enough reason for his actions.

"You got me and Sully. We're here for you now" he reassured Garza.

"Roger that, and you guys are great too. I mean that, bro," he said, sniffing and using his paw like hands to wipe his face.

"Let's go back up and get some rest, we both could use it" Lucky stood up, stretching his arms over his head.

"Ah, sure, I'll be right there" Garza managed.

"C'mon man, you've been down here by yourself long enough."

“Yeah, just gimme a minute to get my thoughts together. And Lucky?”

“What’s up?”

“Do me a favor, get that heart of yours fixed. These doctors, they can do good stuff these days. You’ve earned it. Get yourself into the VA and let them take care of you” Garza begged him.

“I said I was gonna work on it.”

“I know what you said, but we’ve talked about your wife and kid before. You have something to live for. It may not be perfect, but you should give yourself every chance to fix things. At least tell them that you love them,” Garza pleaded. “I’d give anything to tell my mom I love her one more time.”

Garza deeply sighed as his body noticeably trembled like he was freezing.

“Okay, yeah. I’ve been thinking about it all night anyway. I’ll check out what they can do for me at the VA and get it done, mend some fences and rebuild my family relationship,” Lucky conceded.

“Cool, give me a minute, I’ll be right there. I just want to say a prayer, ya know?”

“Okay, but if you’re not up there in a few minutes I’ll be right back down to carry you up” Lucky threatened lightheartedly.

“Sure, sure, always the tough guy” Garza laughed weakly.

Lucky walked back to the campsite where he found Tim chewing on some beef jerky beside a newly made fire that was crackling away.

“How’s it going?” Tim asked.

“He’s screwed up in the penthouse, dude. He’s really had a bad time of it.”

“He told you about it?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t just him losing his three buddies over there, but both of his parents back here all around the same time, then his woman left him. He’s holding it down pretty well for all of that,” Lucky said as he took his place near the fire.

As loud as any scream that either of them had ever heard, as sharp and snappy as any crack that both of them had ever experienced, a single shot rang out and chased all of the other sounds from the area. Lucky’s eyes bulged as he stared straight into Tim’s. They both knew what the sound was. They also were fully conscious of where it had come from. Lucky’s head dangled down. He no longer expected Garza to come back. They had just listened to Garza take his life. The pistol that they feared would go off finally did.